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Conor Cruise O'Brien: Violent Notions

Diarmuid Whelan

Irish Academic Press, 2009, ISBN 978 0 7165 2865 4.

Love him or hate him, Conor Cruise O'Brien was one of Ireland's best-known intellectuals of the last forty years. Indeed, it was precisely his express taste for provoking such emotive reactions that kept him in the public eye for so long. Alongside this ability to divide opinion, O'Brien's remarkable life story also contributed to the interest in his work. The grandson of David Sheehy MP (a leading figure in the Irish Parliamentary Party), O'Brien – as he liked to boast – was educated among Protestants in an almost homogenously Catholic State and went on to enjoy multiple careers in the Irish Civil Service (1941-57); at the United Nations (1957-61) where he served as UN Representative on an ill-fated expedition in the Congo in 1960-1; as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana (1962-5); as honorary professor at New York University (1965-9); as Labour TD for Dublin North East (1969-77) and Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in the Fine Gael-Labour coalition government of 1973-7; as editor-in-chief of *The Observer* (1979-81); as newspaper columnist with the *Irish Independent*; and finally, as a leading member of Robert McCartney's now defunct UK Unionist Party (1996-8). Diarmuid Whelan's admirable biography charts the contours of this colourful life and attempts to make sense of 'the intellectual flux in O'Brien's political odyssey' (p.xix) mainly by exploring the key personal and intellectual influences on his work and his attempts to grapple with the major political issues of his day.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part (Conor Cruise O'Brien: The Man) deals with O'Brien's early political and intellectual formation within the Sheehy clan, as well as the considerable influence that Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, Seán O'Faoláin and Albert Camus in particular exercised over the youthful O'Brien. The chapters on the Sheehy family and O'Brien's father are meticulously researched and they supply original and fascinating insights into the conditions and politics of O'Brien's family before and after his birth. In particular, they provide an interesting corrective to O'Brien's own gloomy and self-righteous account of his family history,

demonstrating that the Sheehys were by no means the political pariahs that he portrayed them - his grandfather's demise was in effect as much a consequence of his own excessive gambling as the rise of Sinn Féin in the aftermath of the Easter Rising (pp.10-11). Also of special interest here is the importance which is attributed to Owen Sheehy-Skeffington's republicanism as an enduring influence on O'Brien. For Whelan this goes some way to explaining his early and paradoxical – in the light of his subsequent unionism – attachment to Cathleen ní Houlihan and his willingness to engage in anti-partitionist propaganda on behalf of the Irish State in the 1950s (pp.54-5).

The second part of the book (The Mind of Conor Cruise O'Brien) turns to the key themes of O'Brien's work examining them in the context of his more overtly political engagements from the 1960s onwards. In a chapter entitled 'The Siege' Whelan argues persuasively that O'Brien's account of the Northern conflict in his seminal work, *States of Ireland* (1972), was predominantly an exercise in 'educating' his Southern audience in an effort to bring it to 'internalize...the Ulster Protestant's worldview.' While O'Brien clearly meant to convince his Southern readers that this 'siege mentality' was fully justified by focusing on the consistent historical threat posed by Irish nationalism, Whelan correctly points out that O'Brien seemed oblivious or unconcerned about the fact that he was producing a totally one-sided account of the Northern conflict (p.94).

Although Whelan produces persuasive criticism of O'Brien of this nature at regular intervals in the book, this is by no means an overly negative assessment of O'Brien's life and work. Part 2 thus contains a fascinating chapter on O'Brien's writings on the legitimization of violence that rightly credits him with an innovative exploration of the intrinsic link between legitimacy and historical narrative – especially in the Irish context where history is more often than not the key legitimizing tool employed by militant nationalists. Indeed, Whelan argues that it was O'Brien's recognition of this that in the end led him to abandon his early metier of historiography for the revisionist tool of 'counter myth' in order to undermine the supposed IRA mentality

of the Southern State (p.140). O'Brien is credited too for his early and robust promotion of the secularisation of the Southern State (p.97). But most controversially of all – and in a move that seems incommensurate with the book's overall assessment of O'Brien's work – Whelan concludes with the claim that O'Brien is among 'the architects of our national intellect' on a par with Pearse and de Valera (p.183). This will seem to many, I suspect, a case of an excess of zeal on the part of the author for his subject. But it in no way detracts from the main body of the book which is an authoritative and insightful account of the life and thought of Conor Cruise O'Brien.

Mark McNally